



AT THE THRESHOLDS: EXPLORING LIMINAL TERRAINS AND TRANSITIONS IN ANTHONY NIELSON'S REALISM

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ABSTRACT

Anthony Nielson's *Realism* is concerned with the tension between the mindscape and the physical world we live in. Nielson's fascination with the hybridity of locations — physical and imaginative — gives us ample possibilities to delve into the liminal spaces of the mind of the protagonist. The unique strategies that he devises to theatrically represent the internal landscape of his protagonists could be seen as extensions of the insights offered by Hans-Thies Lehmann in his influential study *Postdramatic Theatre*. The emancipation of the performance from the literary text, being the central concern of the postdramatic has an almost total disregard for traditional dramatic unity textual both at the textual and performative levels. Examining how Nielson uses various techniques to make the viewers think whether they are in the interiorscape or in waking reality is the purpose of this paper. Interpreting performances such as *Realism* cannot straightforwardly be about decoding the meaning of theatrical signs as they are presented within the framework of the dramatic structure. Hence, this paper also aims to study Nielson's heterotopian strategies in his innovative approach to mapping the liminal mindscape as well as to theatre-making. Staging the action played out in the mind challenges the representational potential of theatre itself, and demands that the page and the stage be turned into an innovative heterotopic space.

KEYWORDS: Liminal, post-drama

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INTRODUCTION

Anthony Nielson's *Realism* is concerned with the tension between the mindscape and the physical world we live in. Most parts of *Realism* are inside the head of its protagonist, Stuart Mac Quarrie. The world of MacQuarrie's daydream and the real world are in opposition—his chaotic interiorscape is contrasted with the Saturday morning sluggishness of his real world. Nielson constantly reminds the readers/viewers that they witnessing a dual plane of existence. Nielson's fascination with the hybridity of locations — physical and imaginative — and the unique strategies that he devises to theatrically represent the internal landscape of his protagonists could be seen as extensions of the insights offered by Hans-Thies Lehmann in his influential study *Postdramatic Theatre*. The emancipation of the performance from the literary text is arguably the most central concern of the postdramatic and hence it has an almost total disregard for traditional dramatic unity textual both at the textual and performative levels. Postdramatic theatre techniques like radical shifts of tone and flights of fancy used profusely in *Realism* make the viewers think whether they are in the interiorscape or in waking reality.

Staging the Mind

Interpreting performances such as *Realism* cannot straightforwardly be about decoding the meaning of theatrical signs as they are presented within the framework of the dramatic structure. The play's overall effect is substantially dependent on a collision between two extreme types of signifying practice, a kind of dialectic of semiotic surplus and famine. It deliberately blurs the boundaries between reality, memory, dream and fantasy in such a way as to confuse audience, thus bringing them into consciousness of themselves as interpreting subjects. The splicing of the real world with Stuart's mindscape is one of the principal strategies that Nielson employs to create his sense of a liminal place in *Realism*. This paper thus aims to study Nielson's heterotopian strategies in his innovative approach to mapping the liminal mindscape as well as to theatre-making. Staging the action played out in the mind challenges the representational potential of theatre itself, and demands that the page and the stage be turned into an innovative heterotopic space.

This pursuit of complexity sought by Nielson's dramaturgy is perhaps in tune with the rethinking of the dramaturgical structure by most of the dramatists of the contemporary (Post-Thatcher British) Political theatre, who helped embed the notion within UK theatre that overt didacticism lacked legitimacy as a mode of dealing with political questions. He belongs to the 'in-her-face theatre' and experimental theatre which shocks the audience with stark honesty and revelation of the conversations in mind that we mask beneath daily life practices. This recognition is perhaps coterminous with Sarah Grochala's theorizing of a turn in political theatre from 'serious' to 'liquid' drama, where shifting paradigms related to time, space and character replace realist, issue-based representation. This in turn suggests a loosening of the traditional conception of addressing politics in theatre tended to assume that the audience's opinions, actions and political views are rationally driven.

Liminal Mindscales and Heterotopic Terrains

It is important to define what the term 'liminal' will be taken to encompass in this paper. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* "liminal" pertains to "a transitional or initial stage of a process ...[m]arginal...[o]ccupying position on, or on both sides of, a boundary or threshold". Nielson showcases how his theatre exists in this liminal zone, this other sort of place as it is concerned with the tension between the landscape of the mind and the tension between the real physical world, we have to live in. Nielson's argument and thematic synopsis display his fascination with 'the internal' and 'the external', and the fact that he believes that we cannot live fully in either one of these places positions the action of his play—the liminal terrains, the space between, as well as the here and the there, and the inside and the outside. Nielson pursues this argument by presenting liminal terrain (dreamy meanderings and waking thoughts inside his head) that does not exist even conceptually as a realist space; rather it exists on the threshold between the material world and a fantasy realm between unconscious impulses, repressed thoughts, and conscious actions. This article hopes to briefly elaborate on the methods of construction of this liminal landscape and the components used in order to do so and in doing so throw light on the liminal mindscape presented on the stage that has turned to a heterotopia (Foucault) and challenge the representational potential of theatre itself.

In an argument between British theatre critic Michael Billington and Anthony Nielson, Nielson observes as to what it is a play should do. He argues that the idea of a "play-as-thesis is by nature reductive, an attempt to bring order to the unruliness of existence" (Grochala 3). He says that he cannot present a coherent idea of the world as he does not believe in such a play. Instead, he claims that most of his plays are "an entirely subjective piece, taking place in the mind of the central character." The play expresses "a state of mind, not the 'state of things'" (Grochala 3).

Nielson designs a quintessentially heterotopian space, producing what Foucault calls "other spaces"—"a sort of simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live" (3). The description of the set in the original production, given as notes from the author gives us an idea of a familiar/unfamiliar space pretty much like our mindscape which actively partakes in the present moment but also has visitations from the repressed unconscious. Foucault's description of these "real places [...] that are formed in the very founding of society", these "counter-sites [...] in which the real sites [...] are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted" (4) represents the stage too. Nielson's characteristic implementation of shock tactics — his habitual recourse to a mode of excess, the strategic use of register shifts to subvert dominant or conventional modes of perception, choice of metaphors drawn from the visual arts, capitalizes on the spatiality of theatre, for the portrayal of the heterotopic mindscape, thereby generating a space for alternatives both on page and on stage. Trish Reid rightly says:

Nielson gives significant weight to elements of performance other than written text. Through this practice he insists that, as Hans-Thies Lehmann has reminded us, at the present historical moment, theatre need not be 'fixed on action alone'. My focus on form and texture can, then, potentially raise some larger questions about the possible direction of experimental theatre in the

twenty-first century but also, and importantly, the demands such theatre makes on the critic and theatre scholar whose job it is to interpret it. Interpreting performances such as *Dissocia* and *Realism* cannot straightforwardly be about deciphering 'the meaning of theatrical signs as they are presented within the framework of the dramatic structure'. (Reid 490)

His commitment to an experiential theatre can be observed when Neilson repeatedly states: "I've always felt that theatre should have a real visceral effect on the audience . . . I'm not really interested in being known as a great writer. I'm more interested in ensuring that people's experience in the theatre is an interesting or surprising one" (Reid 490).

One function of heterotopias which is central to theatre-making in general, and *Realism* in particular, is the superimposition of different spaces, as Foucault explains, "The heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible." (Foucault 9). This play foregrounds the incompatibility between actions in real time and that of the mindscape. This point gets more clarity from the stage directions and introductory notes that give the stage settings. These notes of the stage shape the page and not like the usual page-to-stage. What follows the notes is a transcript of the original production of this play, including notes – where relevant – for translators. Stage directions, costume and design notes are expected to be viewed as a guide only, and not as strict dictations. For example, in the published text of the play Neilson presents 'breakdowns' in 'square brackets at the scene beginnings' that are intended to "describe what is actually occurring in the play's 'real' time-line". These, he insists, he has written for his 'own benefit' and suggests that the reader might prefer to overlook them, "and experience the show in the same vague sense of confusion that the audience did". (Neilson 4) Such looser framework facilitates constant additions or revisions and allow Neilson to push the boundaries and explore "other spaces" like the lighting and the sound begins. Neilson gives considerable weight to elements of performance other than written text, as evidenced by his notes on original stage design, the music choice (3-4) with the hope that the audience will be subconsciously able to relate to it. The need to engage and involve spectators, to leave more space to the audience, is at the heart of Neilson's innovative staging/writing of *Realism*, and what could be referred to as its postdramatic sensibilities.

The audience has to keep pace with the protagonist who moves in his inner mindscape through association, renouncing formal logic or conventional readability, superimposing different spaces, either literal (the hall, the kitchen), or repressed/false (traumatic childhood with mullet), or the abhorred (relationships ended for practicality), visual media (radio discussion show), painful memories (death of his mother) and more.

Realism is all scene and situation. The setting is the living room of the central character, Stuart McQuarrie, who has decided not to go out on this particular Saturday. Stuart's living room, we realise is not the realist living room. The living room in *Realism* instead consists of isolated domestic objects on the stage, at different angles and half buried in sand. This living room reflects Mc Quarrie who is in a similar state of confusion and deterioration. The challenge to ordinary setting is clear when in the epilogue one gets to see the set flown in:

*A Box is flown in.
When the lights come up it is revealed as a kitchen. The furniture – the washing machine, the cooker, the fridge, etc – is exactly the same as that which was dotted around the set, but now it's in its proper place. It looks very real. (Neilson 67)*

In the mythical/dreamy/heterotopic setting where much of the 'action' of the play takes place, nothing necessarily leads anywhere. Throughout this ironically titled play *Realism*, Neilson challenges established theatrical codes and conventions. Yet another instance of this is the deliberate shifting between registers. In Act 2 the central character, Stuart 'enters, opening a bill':

*He stops, and reads it.
Stuart: What the fuck . . . ?
Pause.
I fucking paid that!
He throws it in the bin and puts the kettle on again. Pause.
What a bunch of cunts.
As he waits for the kettle to boil, he repeats the phrase, singing it to himself.
What a bunch of cunts, what a bunch of cunts . . .
What a bunch of cunts, what a bunch of cunts . . .
Music begins. He sings along, the orchestration becoming more elaborate.
Behind him female dancers appear
He becomes involved in a song and dance number . . .
Male dancers join in. They are blacked-up. Like Al Jolson (Neilson 30-31)*

The confusion and liminality in Stuart's mindscape are expressed at more than just the level of text. *Realism* offers no stable dramatic perspective that would allow its audience to develop a coherent interpretation of what is happening on stage in terms of plot and action. Trish Reid says:

There are whole characters that are not 'real' in the dramatic sense but who interact with Stuart in his daily routines. Actor Matthew Pidgeon says, for example, his character Mullet was conceived as 'a sort of adolescent alter-ego, a child version of Stuart who is deeply and aggressively disappointed in him. Mullet's appearances in the play don't follow any discernible pattern. In fact, Pidgeon recalls Neilson emphasising his characters lack of plot function in rehearsals: 'your character can do whatever he wants, he can leave the stage when someone is talking to him, he can throw sand in Stuart's face'. (497-498)

CONCLUSION

Thus, by reading through the dramaturgical structures that form the building blocks of a play, the paper examines the words on the page of the text for understanding how it brings alive the deep recesses of human mind on stage. By paying more attention to the craft and structures of playwriting through contemporary scholarship, this paper has attempted to make more nuanced understanding of the plays and highlight the relationship of these plays to contemporary society. What is important is that one gets to realise that in Neilson's theatre, political engagement does not necessarily consist only in the topics but also in the forms of engagement. Neilson cherishes unpredictability of daily life and in his exploration of the boundaries between performance and reality through new techniques, he poses a challenge to performers and audiences to transform their ways of acting and reacting. Nielson triggers unusual audience response by transforming the theatrical space into a heterotopic liminal space where the invisible reveals itself and the imaginary is performed.

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